The Quick Group IT Roundtable: Managing a Crisis on the Global Stage

Quick Group IT Roundtable – Part 1

Part 1: Managing a Crisis on the Global Stage

Introduction:

As we know, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted nearly every aspect of our lives. And as every business had to reinvent operating procedures on the fly, the goal was the same: Maintain operations, serve clients, stay safe.

And when managing global supply chains for clients in nearly every continent, that's a lot to reinvent on the fly. And behind it all: The technology: Customer apps, internal operations, and – all of a sudden – a work-from-home employee base. One that still needs to maintain the extraordinary service levels and business continuity that clients who depend on a seamless global supply chain require for mission-critical and life-saving logistics.

So for The Quick Group, what did it take to ensure all aspects of its back and front end technology were in place to keep clients and supply chains secure? How much of it was some version of the old motto – Be Prepared – and how much meant leveraging internal experience and creativity to solve the inevitable obstacles that a global pandemic throws at you.

To find out, we hosted a dynamic virtual roundtable with four of The Quick Group's technology leaders, who support the company's four business units -- Sterling Global Aviation Logistics, Quick Specialized Healthcare Logistics, QuickSTAT Global Life Science Logistics and Quick Specialty Logistics. They include:

- **Eric Bischoff, Chief Information Technology Officer**

- **Michael McNally, Vice President of IT Product Management**
- **Ed Wendell, Director of User and System Support Documentation & Training**
- **Bob Rottinger, Director of IT Infrastructure and Compliance**

In fact, the conversation was so filled with insights, best practices, and actionable guidance for clients, that we broke the conversation into two parts.

Now, here's part one of our Quick Group IT Roundtable discussion.

Chris Riback: Thank you for joining this call. Really looking forward to this group meeting.

Michael McNally: Good morning.

Ed Wendell: [00:02:00] Good morning.

Bob Rottinger: Good morning.

Eric Bischoff: Good morning.

Chris Riback: Good morning. Why don't we start by going quickly round robin. And just tell me, although I already know it. So we'll tell our audience your names and what you do. Eric, why don't we start with you?

Eric Bischoff: Yes, I'm Eric Bischoff, Chief Information Technology Officer for Quick. Been here 37, 38 years. I lose track. I'm located in Long Island, New York. I oversee [00:02:30] IT, telecommunications and facilities.

Chris Riback: Excellent. Thanks so much for joining. Mike, let's hear about you.

Michael McNally: Yes, Michael McNally. Hello, Vice President of IT Product Management. Been with Quick for 13 years now. And I oversee the product, the IT product and the future roadmap for quick.

Chris Riback: Excellent. Ed, [00:03:00] tell us about you.

Ed Wendell: Good morning.

Chris Riback: Good morning.

Ed Wendell: My name is Edward Wendell, I'm the director of users and systems documentation and training, I've been with Quick international carrier for 20 years, I manage the help desk, [00:11:00] I work with all the employees in the company to help resolve their problems as they come up.

Chris Riback: Excellent. And Bob you're the newbie, right? You're still [00:03:30] the rookie?

Bob Rottinger: I am. My name is Bob Rottinger, I've been with Quick for about three years now. And I am responsible for IT infrastructure and compliance.

Chris Riback: Excellent. Excellent. Well, if you only go another 10 times, 11 times a little bit more than that actually, about 13 times may even start catching up to Eric. So something to look forward to.

Bob Rottinger: I would be 100 years old.

Chris Riback: [00:04:00] Well, I'm sure you would still be keeping the IT systems running and everything working perfectly for clients externally and internally. So on that topic of IT and the capabilities, the products, the infrastructure, the continuity of business. Needless to say, you guys, as well as most of the world has really, [00:04:30] really been put to the test over the last year. And I am really anxious to get to hear about that from you, hear about how you were prepared, in what ways had investments and decisions that you had made over the years, put you in a position for COVID-19, for the pandemic and then to , what has been happening during the pandemic that has surprised you? [00:05:00] And then we can look forward a little bit and what are you thinking about continuity of business in terms of IT systems going forward?

Chris Riback: But why don't we start with how you were prepared? In what ways were you prepared? What did you have in place, going into this pandemic? And Eric, why don't we start with you. I would assume that those circumstances that you had considered in terms of your own continuity of business were all of the usual, weather, earthquakes, power outages, all the things that we kind of expected. One [00:06:00] was pandemic on your list. And two, what were the decisions that you had made over time previously coming into this? What was your level of preparedness coming into COVID?

Eric Bischoff: Oh, yes, it's in our DNA. The show must go on. So we've always worked with that in mind, we're a 24 by 7 company. And [00:06:30] we've certainly been tested over the years and keeping things running. And we learn every time there's an event and we adjust, and we add more redundancy. So it's part of what we do. And I think we're very good at this point. So this pandemic, certainly added some layers of complexity to this. Mostly, because even though we've had a lot of people [00:07:00] working from home in the past, to the tune of probably 100 people, we're now at a level of probably 300 people working from home. So, we've made it work.

Chris Riback: So talk to me about some of the areas of redundancy that you had in place previously going into this, what [00:07:30] did continuity of business mean from your point of view?

Eric Bischoff: Well, there's two of everything, at least. So there's two data centers in the different geographic locations. In those data centers, there are two of everything when it comes to servers or routers, or switches, sometimes even three or more. At the level of the offices, [00:08:00] same thing. Everything is in doubles, including the internet connections and the MPLS circuits from the carriers. And power, the same thing. We have generators in our control towers. And even at the office at the desk level we have UPS's, so we try to make it as redundant as possible.

Chris Riback: But to be [00:08:30] fair, there is only one

Eric Bischoff, I mean, you might have to have everything, but there's only one Eric Bischoff, right?

Eric Bischoff: Yes, but I have a whole team.

Chris Riback: Okay, so we've got you doubled as well, all bases covered. Ed, I'm curious about help desk, and users and ways in which going into, so pre-COVID, what would be some of the challenges that you might run into, [00:09:00] and in what ways were you prepared to be able to answer those challenges, and keep the internal team running 24/7?

Ed Wendell: We've always been very, very busy, and we're very responsive, we've provided support around the clock, 365 days a year. And I went back and looked at the numbers of the number of requests that we've gotten in from year to year and we're a little bit higher this year, obviously, due to COVID.

Chris Riback: Ed, let's talk about those problems and help desk preparedness pre -COVID. What were some of the things ... How did you ensure, what were the responsibilities, what did it look like to ensure continuity of business to keep the Quick employees [00:11:30] up and ready 24/7, because, as you know, that's what your clients expect.

Ed Wendell: The key for us is to never take any problem too lightly. Any little problem that comes in that gets reported from somebody could be indicative of a greater problem. As issues come in, you've got to triage them, you've got to see what's more important. If you see one person having a problem connecting that could be a local issue. Because if all of a sudden you see three or four similar problems come in with a few minutes, then you've got to assemble a team and look because there could be a problem that could be affecting many more people. The key is to always be prepared for something huge happening.

Chris Riback: And Mike from the product management point of view, I'm sure you're wearing multiple hats, but of the two main hats, are you thinking about how do I improve, grow, design products that are responsive [00:13:00] to client requirements, that are the types of products that we at Quick are trying to deliver to the rest of the world? But what about the issues of preparedness, and continuity of business, when those issues come up, I guess, one, how do you consider that when you are thinking about product management?

Michael McNally: Yes, so it's definitely always in our conversation, we actually have weekly calls with the architecture team, Bob and Eric, and the development team to discuss our uptime, and our redundancies and when you're building products, and you're collecting user stories from customers and internal users, [00:14:00] you're obviously thinking of features and the sizzle on the steak, right? But, we have our job to also make sure that what we're building is redundant, has those safety measures in place, have backups available, so if a customer can't get online, then what are other options of solving that issue or providing that information [00:14:30] we have plenty of different ways of communicating, we have push notifications, email notifications, verbal notifications.

Michael McNally: So, it's always something as we move technology, as people move away from faxes to emails, emails to slack and teams, and mobile. It's continuing to support those legacy systems as well because they are our backups and our redundancies. If there are issues which there are and it's not always in our control, we have an amazing team that jumps on an emergency work order at all times of the day and night, but sometimes it's just an outage, Netflix is down, Amazon services are down.

So, how do we handle that when it's out of our control, which is a huge topic of conversation that we discussed when building our new products,

Chris Riback: Well, if Netflix is down, I mean, that's a global emergency.

Michael McNally: [00:15:30] Exactly.

Eric Bischoff: All hands on deck.

Chris Riback: How do you balance from a strategic point of view, the sizzle that you just mentioned, because I am sure pushing the envelope on the sizzle means introducing some risk, because it's new. So how do you think about balancing those tensions?

Michael McNally: It's definitely a balance. It's definitely something where we want to obviously push, we want to continue to push, push our teams and try to think outside the box,[00:16:30] but we have to continue to think about us as logistics specialists, how do we control that in a way where we know it's for the best of our customer, and for the best of the product as a whole.

Michael McNally: So it's a lot of conversation. And that's why we bring the development team, the sales team, the operations team. So we bring everybody in, we're discussing these user stories, these ideas [00:17:00] if it comes in by a customer specifically, or just kind of naturally in a conversation, and maybe a work shop session, and talk it out and figure out, "Okay, well, this is what we can do, or maybe this is what we would like to do." And we can always [00:17:30] change and react based on our initial rollout of that feature.

Chris Riback: And really providing transparency at every level to the customers. Bob, from a compliance point of view, where does preparedness, where does continuity of business fit into the compliance areas that you think about all the time?

Bob Rottinger: Well, I [00:18:00] think it's better to look at it from our customer's point of view. Just yesterday, as a matter of fact, I was participating in three customer audits. And the first question was, what are we doing for business continuity? Whether it's the protection of data, or locations in which we can recover [00:18:30] our data? It's the number one question that they're asking today. And it's the number one job of people in IT. The tried and true acronym of CIA, which is the confidentiality, integrity and availability of data is paramount to what we do from a compliance [00:19:00] standpoint, because it's all about our data. So it's really important, it's never ending. And compliance is probably the number two item on our list. The first one is availability. The second one is compliance, ensuring that the way that we manage, store, transmit and protect our data meets [00:19:30] the many different guidelines and requirements of our customers, regardless of the nation, the country that they're in, and the guidelines that they're operating under.

Chris Riback: So it's very important from a customer standpoint, clients need to know what's happening at every milestone?

Bob Rottinger: Correct.

Chris Riback: For clients to know what is happening at every milestone, how do we provide that? How do you provide that?

Michael McNally: So we have a lot of operational checkpoints in place, every step of the way we're collecting that information. Where the packages are being collected, it's at the airport, it's in customs, there's a delay at customs, it's been released from customs. [00:21:00] So we have a suite of these checkpoints. And there our systems are designed to alarm, have our operational team say, "Okay, it's time to now call and find out some more information," and we're taking this information, we're collecting it into our system from many different sources, and then that's being provided in real time to the customers via those items I mentioned earlier, push notifications, mobile app, [00:21:30] email notifications, text.

Michael McNally: So there's just a whole different way of how every customer wants to receive those milestone updates and get this

information from us. And we are pretty proud of how much information we can provide. And something that we continue to look at to say, are there additional information we do want to provide, [00:22:00] and now with a lot of our partners providing information on flight delays, or weather issues, and we can continue to add that data into our notifications streams, and our tools to add not only our checkpoints, but a host of other information from GPS locations, to drivers locations, to, [00:22:30] flight information that we we're aggregating and putting all together in one nice neat package for the customer.

Chris Riback: And in terms of innovation on that area, on alerts and transparency, is it about bundling the different sets of information, the different data points, is that where new ways of communicating will come up, or is it a technology question in [00:23:00] terms of methods of communication? So you mentioned the evolution from fax to email to slack now, and push alerts? How do you think about always advancing that transparency?

Michael McNally: Yes, it's both, every company now is mostly providing an external API, right? So it's saying, here's our API, here's our data, we can give it to you in this form, do with it how you want to, what you need to. [00:23:30] So, we're building internal tools to obviously hook into these services. And then deciding how do we want to display this to the customer in something that's visible, they can understand. Now we have a lot of customers that aren't logistics specialists, they don't understand verbiage that's being used, is not always clear from a common users perspective. [00:24:00] So we spend a lot of time and we have a great design team to think of how does the person receiving this, view this information.

Michael McNally: How does this mechanic understand where their part may be. We have to think of all these different personas because our business units are verticals, have a suite of different types of customers. And each customer understands [00:24:30] some information slightly differently and that we want to make sure that we're providing all that information, all of those data sources into one unified simple to view, read, understand stream, and that's accessible from a computer in your home office with your 34 inch ultra-wide, down to a tablet, maybe you're on site or a mobile phone, and how do you do that with varying [00:25:00] device sizes,

varying profile platforms and trying to simplify it to cover all types of customers.

Chris Riback: And I am certain that all types of customers, all types of devices, as COVID arrived and accelerated the need for [00:25:30] information as quickly as possible. And the need for answering questions around continuity of business preparedness only increased. And so, Eric, I would love to turn back to you. A global pandemic surely brings new challenges, you had talked about the redundancy, at least two of everything. But what surprised you, what impacted you that you might not have expected? And what did you hear from clients, whether that was directly [00:26:30] or through the team, through customer facing Quick colleagues, as COVID arrived and accelerated for a person who has spent so much of your career thinking about continuity of business and building in redundancies, what surprised you?

Eric Bischoff: What surprised me was, whatever scenarios we had thought of in the past, [00:27:00] now, all of a sudden, they were all new. So we had to come up with new scenarios. It all happened pretty quickly too. Alright, so you get people to work from home, some people starting to come back into the control towers, and then it starts up again. So that was an unexpected as well, we also had to answer a lot more questions to the customers for audits as to [00:27:30] what our preparedness is, or what's our plan for this year.

Chris Riback: And Ed, what did you see, what surprised you?

Ed Wendell: Oh, boy, whenever he talks about the speed of this, when this first hit, we had about 75 to 80 people that were permanently working from home already, and a handful of others [00:28:00] that could work from home, and then we went and added another 335 people on top of that. So now, close to 65%, 70% of our workforce can work from home.

Ed Wendell: But everyone handled it really well, from all of our team, to all of what I like to call our customers, our employees, because in IT [00:28:30] that's a lot who I serve. And we've got the best customers in the world, these people, under very trying situations went home, and set up

equipment, and they were asked to do a lot of stuff on their own. And it was very, very difficult for a lot of them to make that adjustment. And it was one of the really pleasant surprises of this, a happy moment out of something worldwide and so tragic. It's was how well everybody [00:29:00] just adjusted to this phase of life.

Chris Riback: Bob, from a compliance point of view, did the compliance book need to be rewritten, or did new chapters need to get added? How did you have to rethink compliance requirements in a COVID world?

Bob Rottinger: Well, again, I think [00:29:30] it was the expectation that our compliance of data, of security, was in place and as resilient and strong before the pandemic as it was during the pandemic. But there were no passes here, all of our clients had expectations that we were either going to be within the guidelines [00:30:30] that they have implored on us, or we were going to exceed those guidelines.

Bob Rottinger: As a matter of fact, the expectation was that we had things in place that we were executing, according to our pandemic [00:31:00] plans, and that it was going to be business as usual. And we're going to meet all the compliance requirements that they already had on us, prior to the pandemic.

Eric Bischoff: We have different business units, from aviation to STAT, to life science, to specialty logistics, and as the pandemic hit, our aviation business, [00:31:30] which was the biggest business unit of them all actually dropped down in volume, because the airlines weren't flying anymore. But QuickSTAT, which is health care, took on a much bigger demanding role. And the work that Bob has to do for compliance is actually much larger when it comes to healthcare and life science and Big Pharma. So, that work is [00:32:00] actually increased because of that.

Chris Riback: And Mike, how did COVID impact the product management side of things?

Michael McNally: Changed some things, obviously now with the push, a lot of customers moving more towards contactless pickups, contactless deliveries, [00:32:30] that's big change for us where we're used to meeting people, having them sign directly with a package, so we had to adapt some of our current, we were able to quickly serve some customers' requests, to make some changes into our mobile app to accommodate some contactless deliveries, but also maintain the security aspect of it. So we worked [00:33:00] with a few customers on how do we allow our agents to make the delivery in a facility, but then they can still secure that to make sure that that package is still there, it's where they expect it to be and that the correct package been delivered.

Michael McNally: So we made a lot of changes there, but with kind of how we have always developed products is always looking to continue to improve. [00:33:30] Luckily, in a couple instances where we had some early products we developed, that were just prior to COVID, moved to a more of a web-based platform, and that really helped serve us and the customer in that transition for them as a lot of their teams moved from a facility or an office together where they may be monitoring their shipments over a large screen in the office to now wanting to [00:34:00] monitor those shipments from their homes. So, continuing to work on our products and reevaluate and iterate on what we already have, has served us to continue to provide to the customer in these unforeseen times that we didn't expect, but ended up.

Eric Bischoff: The complexities like we had to build a virtual call center. That's something that was new in our world. Michael, has been pretty busy this year, we were early adopters of technology in our industry, and we had our own ERP that we released starting in 1990. [00:35:00] We had our online system in 2000. And we're now in the phase, this year of rebuilding brand new technology. So a lot of Michael's time is taken up with this. And now we've become experts at using zoom to do development teams.

Outro: That was Part One of the Quick Group IT Roundtable. In Part Two, we move deeper not only into best practices, but also into client relationships, and how they evolved based on their continuity of business requirements and Quick's technology capabilities.

To learn more about Quick's global logistics solutions or to subscribe to our podcast, go to quick.aero/podcasts